

THE SHOPMAN

If I were really opulent, I would not go into a shop at all--I would have a private secretary. If I were really determined, Euphemia would do these things. As it is, I find buying things in a shop the most exasperating of all the many trying duties of life. I am sometimes almost tempted to declare myself Adamite to escape it. The way the shopman eyes you as you enter his den, the very spread of his fingers, irritate me. "What can I have the pleasure?" he says, bowing forward at me, and with his eye on my chin--and so waits.

Now I hate incomplete sentences, and confound his pleasure! I don't go into a shop to give a shopman pleasure. But your ordinary shopman must needs pretend you delight and amuse him. I say, trying to display my dislike as plainly as possible, "Gloves." "Gloves, yessir," he says. Why should he? I suppose he thinks I require to be confirmed in my persuasion that I want gloves. "Calf--kid--dogskin?" How should I know the technicalities of his traffic? "Ordinary gloves," I say, disdainingly his petty distinctions. "About what price, sir?" he asks.

Now that always maddens me. Why should I be expected to know the price of gloves? I'm not a commercial traveller nor a wholesale dealer, and I don't look like one. Neither am I constitutionally parsimonious nor

petty. I am a literary man, unworldly, and I wear long hair and a soft hat and a peculiar overcoat to indicate the same to ordinary people. Why, I say, should I know the price of gloves? I know they are some ordinary price--elevenpence-halfpenny, or three-and-six, or seven-and-six, or something--one of those prices that everything is sold at--but further I don't go. Perhaps I say elevenpence-halfpenny at a venture.

His face lights up with quiet malice. "Don't keep them, sir," he says. I can tell by his expression that I am ridiculously low, and so being snubbed. I think of trying with three-and-six, or seven-and-six; the only other probable prices for things that I know, except a guinea and five pounds. Then I see the absurdity of the business, and my anger comes surging up.

"Look here!" I say, as bitterly as possible. "I don't come here to play at Guessing Games. Never mind your prices. I want some gloves. Get me some!"

This cows him a little, but very little. "May I ask your size, sir?" he says, a trifle more respectfully.

One would think I spent all my time remembering the size of my gloves. However, it is no good resenting it. "It's either seven or nine," I say in a tired way.

He just begins another question, and then he catches my eye and stops and goes away to obtain some gloves, and I get a breathing space. But why do they keep on with this cross-examination? If I knew exactly what I wanted--description, price, size--I should not go to a shop at all, it would save me such a lot of trouble just to send a cheque to the Stores. The only reason why I go into a tradesman's shop is because I don't know what I want exactly, am in doubt about the name or the size, or the price, or the fashion, and want a specialist to help me. The only reason for having shopmen instead of automatic machines is that one requires help in buying things. When I want gloves, the shopman ought to understand his business sufficiently well to know better than I do what particular kind of gloves I ought to be wearing, and what is a fair price for them. I don't see why I should teach him what is in fashion and what is not. A doctor does not ask you what kind of operation you want and what price you will pay for it. But I really believe these outfitter people would let me run about London wearing white cotton gloves and a plaid comforter without lifting a finger to prevent me.

And, by the bye, that reminds me of a scandalous trick these salesmen will play you. Sometimes they have not the thing you want, and then they make you buy other things. I happen to have, through no fault of my own, a very small head, and consequently for one long summer I wore a little boy's straw hat about London with the colours of a Paddington Board School, simply because a rascal outfitter hadn't my size in a proper kind of headgear, and induced me to buy the thing by specious representations. He must have known perfectly well it was not what I

ought to wear. It seems never to enter into a shopman's code of honour that he ought to do his best for his customer. Since that, however, I have noticed lots of people about who have struck me in a new light as triumphs of the salesman, masterpieces in the art of incongruity; age in the garb of youth, corpulence put off with the size called "slender men's"; unhappy, gentle, quiet men with ties like oriflammes, breasts like a kingfisher's, and cataclysmal trouser patterns. Even so, if the shopkeeper had his will, should we all be. Those poor withered maiden ladies, too, who fill us with a kind of horror, with their juvenile curls, their girlish crudity of colouring, their bonnets, giddy, tottering, hectic. It overcomes me with remorse to think that I myself have accused them of vanity and folly. It overcomes me with pain to hear the thoughtless laugh aloud after them, in the public ways. For they are simply short-sighted trustful people, the myopic victims of the salesman and saleswoman. The little children gibe at them, pelt even.... And somewhere in the world a draper goes unhung.

However, the gloves are bought. I select a pair haphazard, and he pretends to perceive they fit perfectly by putting them over the back of my hand. I make him assure me of the fit, and then buy the pair and proceed to take my old ones off and put the new on grimly. If they split or the fingers are too long--glovemakers have the most erratic conceptions of the human finger--I have to buy another pair.

But the trouble only begins when you have bought your thing. "Nothing more, sir?" he says. "Nothing," I say. "Braces?" he says. "No, thank

you," I say. "Collars, cuffs?" He looks at mine swiftly but keenly, and with an unendurable suspicion.

He goes on, item after item. Am I in rags, that I should endure this thing? And I get sick of my everlasting "No, thank you"--the monotony shows up so glaringly against his kaleidoscope variety. I feel all the unutterable pettiness, the mean want of enterprise of my poor little purchase compared with the catholic fling he suggests. I feel angry with myself for being thus played upon, furiously angry with him. "No, no!" I say.

"These tie-holders are new." He proceeds to show me his infernal tie-holders. "They prevent the tie puckering," he says with his eye on mine. It's no good. "How much?" I say.

This whets him to further outrage. "Look here, my man!" I say at last, goaded to it, "I came here for gloves. After endless difficulties I at last induced you to let me have gloves. I have also been intimidated, by the most shameful hints and insinuations, into buying that beastly tie-holder. I'm not a child that I don't know my own needs. Now will you let me go? How much do you want?"

That usually checks him.

The above is a fair specimen of a shopman--a favourable rendering. There are other things they do, but I simply cannot write about them because

it irritates me so to think of them. One infuriating manoeuvre is to correct your pronunciation. Another is to make a terrible ado about your name and address--even when it is quite a well-known name.

After I have bought things at a shop I am quite unfit for social intercourse. I have to go home and fume. There was a time when Euphemia would come and discuss my purchase with a certain levity, but on one occasion....

Some day these shopmen will goad me too far. It's almost my only consolation, indeed, to think what I am going to do when I do break out. There is a salesman somewhere in the world, he going on his way and I on mine, who will, I know, prove my last straw. It may be he will read this--amused--recking little of the mysteries of fate.... Is killing a salesman murder, like killing a human being?

THE BOOK OF CURSES

Professor Gargoyl, you must understand, has travelled to and fro in the earth, culling flowers of speech: a kind of recording angel he is, but without any sentimental tears. To be plain, he studies swearing. His collection, however, only approaches completeness in the western